CURATING / COMPOSTING / COMPORTING: A DIALOGUE IN PAST AND PRESENT REGISTERS

How can one generation emerge, and not know the one before?[1]

In the 1970s, radical filmmaking practices were developed as a tool for expression and activism among those engaged with the cause of women's liberation. Artists, organisers, archivists and historians have supported, showed, preserved and discussed such work, enabling their presentation in the present film programme, *Through a Radical Lens*, which has been curated by Lucy Reynolds with contributions from Club des Femmes, Karen di Franco, Rachel Garfield and Will Fowler; as well as in the exhibition *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990*.[2]

In the context of increasingly constrained state support for the arts, exhibitions and events dealing with these histories in public galleries are frequently packaged in the media as 'first ever', 'little-known', 'newly-discovered', and so on, to bait prospective audiences. While such frameworks can point to real biases of representation or value in museum collections, archives and educational curricula, they also foreclose the potential for the bodies of work presented to come together as a critical mass. Taken individually, they are interesting examples of artists or curators working against the current. Taken together, they are a current of their own: a challenge to more limited ideas of what constitutes our cultural inheritance as portrayed in the media. If everything is always a 'first look', are we prevented from examining such work in sufficient complexity or in relation to broader intersecting and contextual concerns? And from seeing our own work as sprouting from such activity?

In 1979, in preparation for the exhibition *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910–1975*,[3] filmmakers Lis Rhodes and Felicity Sparrow undertook research into the history of women making films that preceded their own practices. They focused on the work of Alice Guy (1873–1968), Germaine Dulac (1882–1942) and Maya Deren (1917–1961). 'Informed by a feminist perspective', they explain in the catalogue, 'it was our intention to begin a re-examination of the historicised past'. During their research, they became concerned that the specific parameters of the show caused women's film work to be misrepresented in terms of its depth and complexity, and met with resistance when attempting to 're-locate' these filmmakers' works 'within the context of their own concerns'.[4] Ultimately, the contemporary women filmmakers Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Jeanette Iljon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy and Susan Stein decided to withhold their work and forgo participation in the exhibition. They authored a joint statement, 'Woman and the Formal Film', which was published in the catalogue along with a selection of historic writings by Guy, Dulac and Deren: highlighting alternative predecessors than those otherwise included in the exhibition.

With gratitude for the circles of artists, archivists and curators who have preserved and who present the work included in this programme, and inspired by the women who intervened in the *Film as Film* catalogue, in this short text I discuss the work of one of many women film curators and programmers working earlier in the 20th century: Iris Barry (1895–1969) who has been the subject of my research for some time.[5] Call it a brief addition to the critical mass (or 'crumpled heap' as Lis Rhodes might have it) of voices that constitute a more expansive history of art and film curating, as well as making.[6]
It is part of the 'generative dialogue in past and present registers' that Rhodes and Sparrow pursued in their programming and organising work after *Film as Film*, as much as in their own filmmaking as Lucy Reynolds has previously discussed.[7] From our contemporary perspective, if the practices that are the focus of this film programme are 'radical', pertaining to the root, then my focus here is the compost in which these roots grew.

Iris Barry moved to London from the Midlands in the 1910s, relying upon secretarial work to support her writing, which began to be published in the small-press literary magazines of the period. In 1924, she began to write film criticism regularly, first for the *Spectator* and *Vogue* magazine, then later for the *Daily Mail.* In 1925 she co-founded the Film Society in London, the first such group dedicated to showing films not otherwise available through commercial release. In 1926 Iris published a book, *Let's Go to the Pictures* and in 1930 she lost her regular column at the *Daily Mail* after a dispute with the proprietor. As a result she moved to New York where, after a period as a jobbing writer, in 1932 she obtained a position as Librarian at the Museum of Modern Art. When the museum's Film Library was formed a few years later, Iris was appointed its first curator. She dedicated the next decade and a half of her working life to securing a place for film within the Museum, acquiring historic and contemporary films — as well as film literature and film ephemera — for the library and archive collection. She also programmed regular screenings at MoMA and developed a film course for Columbia University. In the 1930s, while visiting European cities in the 1930s to acquire films on behalf of MoMA, Iris was instrumental in arranging early meetings that would lead to the formation of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), of which she was elected president in 1946.

While Iris Barry's professional outputs cannot be understood as feminist, she nevertheless contributed to staking out an acknowledgement of women's experiences and women's knowledge at the heart of cinema as a medium. In *Let's Go to the Pictures* she foregrounded the prominence of women as the primary audience of cinema, noting, for example that cinema 'exists for the purpose of pleasing women', and that 'three out of every four of all cinema audiences are women.' She encouraged women to agitate for better films that more accurately represent their experience, including their erotic experience, deriding the false sentiment contained in many films, which she contends, 'correspond to nothing in the actual erotic experience of anyone.'[8]

Iris also highlighted both the common and communal aspects of cinema, countering other theories of film developed at the time that privileged film's potential as an avant-garde art form appealing only to a minority. Her primary definition of cinema is as — to use her term — a 'comporter': a vessel for ideas and/or emotion.[9] This definition of cinema as 'comporter' combines the mobile, processual utility that Ursula Le Guin describes in her 1988 essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. In contrast to the prevailing 'shape' of fiction as one of 'sticks and spears and swords' and 'long hard things' (all wielded by a singular hero) Le Guin contends that a better shape for a story 'might be that of a sack, a bag', in which can be put many things to be carried about, shared, combined, transformed.[10] Among the various vessels Le Guin cites (a 'leaf, a gourd, a shell, a net, a bag, a sling, a sack, a bottle, a pot, a box, a container') is also a 'recipient': a body.[11]

For Iris, the body/comporter of cinema was feminine: in a letter written in 1927 during a visit the West coast of the United States, Barry notes the magnificence of the new cinemas there: 'really lovely, what music and projection, and all built on a purely uterine design with the orgasm on the screen.'[12] Barry was just one of several women who took prominent organisational, programming and critical roles in connection with cinema in the interwar period. Olwen Vaughan was BFI Secretary and director of the London Film Institute Society, Vera Llewelyn was programmer for the Forum Cinema, C.A. Lejeune was film critic at the *Observer* from 1928, Irene Nicholson wrote for *Film Art* (later as editor), as did Marie Seton (who went on to write biographies of Sergei Eisenstein, Paul Robeson and Satyajit Ray). Dilys Powell was film critic for the *Sunday Times* from 1939.[13] As critics and curators, these women shaped people's expectations of cinema, 'framing debates, defining interests and augmenting experience before and after' people watched the films themselves, as Haidee Wasson has argued.[14] They established a space for women in the cinema which continues today.

—Inga Fraser

1 Griselda Pollock, Feminism meets Art History 1944/2024: Helen Rosenau's monumental Woman in Art, then and now, Paul Mellon Centre, London, January 2024

2 Curated by Linsey Young, with Zuzana Flaskova, Hannah Marsh and myself.

3 The exhibition was a version of a project originally conceived by Birgit Hein and staged at the Kunstverein in Cologne as *Film Als Film* in 1977. It ran from 3 May to 17 June 1979 at the Hayward Gallery.

4 Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Jeanette Iljon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy and Susan Stein, 'Woman and the Formal Film' in *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910–1975* (London: Hayward Gallery: 1979) p.118.

5 See, for example, Inga Fraser, 'Iris Barry', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

6 In her essay 'Whose History?', Lis Rhodes explains that rather than neat lineages, she prefers 'a crumpled heap, history at my feet, not stretched above my head.' *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910–1975* (London: Hayward Gallery: 1979) p.120.

7 Lucy Reynolds, 'Whose History?' Feminist Advocacy and Experimental Film and Video' in Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (eds.) *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2017) pp.138–149.

8 Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures*, pp.68, 59.

9 Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures*, pp. 244, 53.

10 Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota, 2019) p.29, 34.

11 Ibid, p.29.

12 Letter from Iris Barry to Ivor Montagu, 27 September 1927. BFI (IM) Item 311.

13 This pattern repeats internationally. See Erica Carter, 'Lotte Eisner: a reappraisal'.

14 Wasson, 'The Woman Film Critic...', pp. 155–156.